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The Aspira Association: Managing National Expansion
"An Investment in Latino Youth"

Introduction

Aspira is a 501 (c) 3 nonprofit organization dedicated to the leadership development and empowerment of Latino youth. It has grown from one small office to a national office in Washington, DC and seven state associates in 45 years. National expansion of a nonprofit organization is very important for expanding successful programs to benefit a greater number of individuals and communities. It can afford lots of success but also present with many challenges.

In the management of Aspira's national expansion, we will look at some of their strengths and challenges, the development of relationships between the National office and state associates, and their strategic planning for the future. Finally, how the program expansion impacts the organizational capacity to achieve high quality performance and ensure the long term sustainability of the ASPIRA Association. (1)

Aspira's Mission and History

Aspira is a 501(c) 3 nonprofit organization whose mission is "to promote the development of the Puerto Rican and Latino community through education and leadership development of its youth."(2) Aspira (which means "to aspire") was founded in 1961 by Dr. Antonia Pantoja and a group of community leaders in New York City "to address the problem of high drop out rates and low educational achievement of Puerto Rican youth as a means to ending poverty in the Puerto Rican community". (3)

Educational achievement is a way of obtaining better employment and opportunities to attain success. Still today, despite the overall decreasing trends of high school drop outs, Latinos still have the largest percentage of high school drop outs compared to the national average and other races/ethnicities. (4) According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the percentage of Latinos completing high school is 68 % as compared to 94% for whites, and 88% for blacks. The high school drop out percentages of Latino immigrants is 41%, for first generation Latinos is 14%, and for second generation Latinos is 11%. In addition, the percentage of Hispanics who have some college is 31% which is still less than 66% for whites, and 51% for blacks (5, 6).

The Aspira founders felt that leadership training and empowerment of the Latino youth would help with their development and ability for academic advancement to become future leaders who are committed to improving themselves and their communities.

The Aspira process leads to growth.

The Aspira Process

The founders developed a Model program for youth leadership development that is the core program of all Aspira activities. This program is implemented through school-based youth leadership clubs where students learn the Aspira process which is composed of awareness, analysis and action. The program provides an environment that "teaches the youth to become *aware* of their current situation, to *analyze* its consequences, and to take *action* for changes in their personal lives and the life of their community." (7) The Aspira leadership clubs provide an opportunity for the students or "aspirantes" to become aware of their culture and community while developing leadership skills and advancing their academic achievements through self regulation. This is done with guidance and collaboration with between students, schools, teachers, and community members.

According to Mr. Ronald Blackburn-Moreno, President and CEO of Aspira, the "youth actively participate in all aspects of the organization. The National Board currently has eight student representatives, who cannot be over the age of 24 (most are presidents of the ASPIRA Clubs Federation in each state)". (3)

A measure of success of the Aspira youth leadership clubs is that the drop out and college bound rates for those schools with Aspira clubs report a 95% graduation rate of the "aspirantes", of which 90% enter college which is significantly higher than the national average of 68% and 31% respectively. (8)

The Expansion of Aspira

According to Mr. Blackburn, because of Aspira's success of the Model program in New York City, Aspira received major funding from the Ford Foundation to replicate the program in other states.

He states that Aspira brought together local community leaders to establish ASPIRA organizations in Illinois, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Puerto Rico. In the late 1970's, these organizations realized that they did not have access to funding from "national" sources (e.g. national foundations). Therefore, these independent ASPIRA organizations joined together to establish the ASPIRA Association. They then created ASPIRA of America to do the national fund raising activities for the Association. Their role gradually changes from not only becoming the national fund-raiser for the Association, but also the public policy voice of ASPIRA and the coordinator/supporter of the Associates. ASPIRA of America eventually moves to Washington DC from New York City and is re-named the ASPIRA Association. In 1981 and 1990, Florida and Connecticut become Associates after many years as "affiliates". (3)

During this time, Aspira grows from an original staff of seven to a staff of 788 full time workers, 279 part- time workers, and 333 volunteers in 2005. They develop collaborations and partnerships with over 200 community based organizations (Latino and non Latino), Universities, and government agencies. From a small nonprofit agency in New York City, they have expanded into a central National Office located in Washington, DC with six state associates and Puerto Rico. The state associates include Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, New

Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, and Puerto Rico. By 2005, the ASPIRA school-based Youth Leadership Clubs grows to over 200 clubs with an estimated 400,000 "aspirante" alumni. (8)

The number of Aspira programs also grows, some common to all state Associates such as the core program and other specific to the needs of the state Associate. These programs include: (9)

- Youth Leadership Development Programs (core program)
- Educational access and careers. Career and college counseling
- Community mobilization for educational excellence.
- Financial aid
- Scholarships
- Education advocacy
- Cultural activities
- Community based projects.
- Organizational development initiatives
- Community Technology Centers
- Charter Schools

Strategic Growth: The National Office and State Associates

Becoming a State Associate

According to Ms.Crespo, Vice President of Aspira, in order to become a state associate, a group of community based organizations and leaders come together to request to apply for associate status. They must present a proposal to the national board and if approved, they will become an "affiliate" before becoming an "associate". They also need to raise and establish their own funding (usually at least $100,000- $200,000 for start up) and develop programs that are consistent with the mission of Aspira, including the school-based Youth Leadership Clubs. The National Office will provide resource support such as

program development and technology assistance. After some time and ensuring a level of effective growth and capacity building, the "affiliates" then become "Associates. (10)

Each state associate is an independent 501 (c) 3 nonprofit sharing the same goals and objectives set by the national office and has their own board of directors. They are responsible for their own growth, funding and development of programs within their state to other cities. Although, they all share the same mission and a few defined Aspira programs, they also have different programs that are specific to the needs of their local communities.

The National Office and the Associates

The Articles of the Associates (11) were established to provide a link of accountability between the national office and state associates. It defines the purpose of the Aspira Association, the Aspira process, and the structure of Aspira associates, including procedures and executive decision making. The roles and functions of the National Office includes: (3, 10)

- To serve as the visible national voice and public policy representative. To be a political leader and advocate to inform and educate the policy makers.
- Provide support of the Associates by assisting in securing funding, program development and implementation, evaluation, national internal communications
- Develops, tests and disseminates "national" programs
- Coordination among the offices
- Setting a National Agenda (National Strategic Plan) that sets the general direction for the entire organization.
- Provide progress reports to the Associates.
- Fundraising, primarily national funding sources
- Financial assistance to state associates

In turn, the roles and functions of Associates includes: (11)

- Advocacy of relevant issues at the local level
- Service Delivery of Local programs
- Fundraising, primarily from local sources
- Reports to national board which include
  - A biannual report of programs
  - Yearly audited financial statements
  - Technical assistance at local level
  - Financial assistance to national office and any other associates

Both Mr. Blackburn and Ms. Crespo note that the state Associates, through the National Board, control the National Office. The National Board is composed of the Chairs of the Board of the local Associates and one student from each state.

As it pertains to the management of performance, the National office collects data for assessment of the State associates using established standards of excellence and tools for measurement for program evaluation and financial responsibility. This is to help enhance the state Associates performance since the state Associates are independent and manage their own organizational program and performance evaluation. Mr. Blackburn points out that "what make the ASPIRA Association unique is that the National office reports to the Associates rather than the other way around". (3)

Strengths and Recognition

The many strengths of Aspira have lead to success and much national recognition. They have been important in the sustainability of the organization. Major successes noted by Ms. Crespo include:

- Aspira responsible for bilingual education reform in New York in Aspira versus Board of Education of New York in 10975.

- Leader in nonprofit tech training and assistance. They have started over 100 community tech centers which provide free public access to internet in addition to the trainings. In 2000, Microsoft gave a 1.7million software donation to Aspira for its innovativeness.(12)

- "Our multiple recognitions demonstrate our success" (10):
    o Founder Dr. Antonia Pantoja in 1996 received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest honor bestowed on civilians by the United States government.

    o Money magazine –Aspira is ranked among the nation's 10 best charities 1998.

    o White house press release in 8/4/98 by President Clinton (13) *"The American institute of philanthropy gave Aspira an A rating in it s annual Charity rating guide and Watchdog report, making it one the top 10 charities in the country."*

    o Hispanic Business Magazine– Aspira is ranked among the top 25 nonprofits in 2001-2005.

    o In 2002, Aspira received the Leadership Independent Sector award which recognizes nonprofits that have develop outstanding programs to identify and nurture future leaders. (14)

Mr. Blackburn notes that "the power and "staying power" of ASPIRA stems from a consistent commitment to the same fundamental mission; and involvement, control and commitment by the local communities and their leaders (versus a centralized organizational structure)". Other strengths include organizational cohesion and strict control over quality of programming through the use of trademarks (Name and logo). (3) This helps to protect the "brand" name reputation and maintain quality.

With Growth come Challenges

A major challenge that ASPIRA has had to overcome as part of the organizational expansion is funding (see figure 1). As seen in the chart, funding

is variable across states and the source of funding (government versus gifts/donations) is also variable with some states having over 90% of funds from the government funds. This can impact the consistency of programs and longevity since most grants are short term. This can also lead to some inconsistency between states depending on their ability to raise funds.

Figure. 1 National Office and Associates- Funding and program differences

	Founded	2004 Budget	% Gov.Funds/ Grants	Community Technical centers	Charter schools
New York	1961	3.4 Million	2 Million	+	Yes
New Jersey	1968	1.4 M	1.2 M	+	
Illinois	1968	4.5 M	4.3 M	+	Yes
Pennsylvania	1969	1.4 M	1 M	+	Yes
Puerto Rico	1969	15.9M	14.9 M	+	
Florida	1981	7.6 M	7.2 M	+	
Connecticut	1990	907K	570K	+	
National office		1.3 M	225K		

A major challenge reported by Mr. Blackburn, is starting an organization in a state and ensuring continuous local support of local leaders and funding. This challenge is also manifested for in-state expansion for similar reasons. This has resulted in not having added an Associate since 1990. Currently, Delaware is under review.

Ms. Crespo also agrees that funding is a major challenge. In addition to limiting the growth of the organization, it also limits funds available for program development and evaluations, and staff development as noted by the

recent lost of funding support for management trainings. In addition, she states that achieving consensus can also be a challenge in order to attain consistency and become more efficient and effective. One approach taken to address this is the development and implementation of an intranet to improve internal communications. Finally, the ability to develop the alumni association and graduate tracking which is very inconsistent.

Strategic Plans

The National offices has strategic plans for addressing funding, continued growth of state associates and statewide organizations, and performance enhancement to sustain and identify ways to improve services.

Some of the future strategic plans expressed by Mr. Blackburn are to expand the funding base within the corporate sector; this will lead to less dependency on government funds. Also, to ensure adequate funding for capital expenditures related to ASPIRA Charter schools and other schools programs. Another plan to move expansion forward is to continue its support of expanding to new states (especially Delaware) and statewide cities expansion. Lastly, to ensure the continued implementation of the Standards of Excellence as a measure of local/national performance to enhance local and nation organizational capacity (local governance, organizations/program management, finance). (3)

Ms. Cresco stated plans for exchanging of staff between offices among the Associates. Exchanging of staff is a good way of learning to share best

practices, enables staff development of new skills while minimizing the costs for outside trainings. It also can help maintain and further enhance organizational cohesion. In addition, the development of the Alumni Association is also important goal for Aspira.

Opportunities

On reviewing the different state websites only one, New Jersey, listed their alumni. With the potential of over 400,000 alumni, I consider the development of membership in the alumni association a window of opportunity. The alumni can be a valuable resource for networking and donations, and augment potential funding from the corporate sector. It can help to reduce dependence on government funds/ grants which can vary and are usually short term. They can also indirectly increase potential resources that can be used for expertise and training across different sectors. Lastly, it can increase the visibility of Aspira in different areas, particularly in states that are not Associates.

In conclusion, Aspira is an interesting example of a nonprofit organization that has had success managing its national expansion and organizational capacity through its adherence to its mission, mutual support between the National Office and state associates and control of quality program performance through the use of trademarks and the processes required to become an Aspira Associate. Although, the expansion of new Associates is slow, they continue to identify and work on their challenges in

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building their organizational capacity, so as to keep moving forward and provide a high quality leadership youth program and improvement of educational attainment of Latino youth in the United States.

> *"It is the capacity for strong performance in organizations- the ability to develop, sustain, and improve the delivery of a mission- that provides the foundation for lasting social benefits".(15)*

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Positive Youth Leadership Development

ASPIRA's work in youth empowerment is supported by a foundation of research related to youth leadership development

The ASPIRA Process

ASPIRA has developed a highly successful model for intervention called the ASPIRA Process The ASPIRA Process of Leadership development can be described by three words Awareness, Analysis and Action To become effective leaders, youth must be aware of themselves of their current situation and challenges, of their goals and aspirations and of their potential for success and leadership and be aware of the community that surrounds them Once aware youth must analyze themselves and their communities, become knowledgeable about them, and become able to propose solutions Awareness and analysis however are not sufficient Action must follow Youth must not only be able to chart the course of action but they must also engage in implementing solutions This is an active process that applies equally to individual development as to social action In this process ASPIRA assists, supports and nurtures youth, providing educational opportunities, guidance and validation and within the context of reinforcing pride in the student's cultural background and his or her self esteem Through the ASPIRA Process young people work together support each other learn about and promote their heritage and develop skills and commitment to serve their community It also engages parents and families to become active partners in education The ASPIRA mission of community development through youth empowerment addresses the needs of young people from a positive perspective of caring and confidence in their potential

Youth Empowerment and Development

Youth empowerment is a process of human growth and development and a framework for youth services (Edginton & deOliveira 1995) The youth empowerment approach promotes greater participation and involvement of youth in the public affairs of the community Youth are not viewed as community problems but as community assets and resources (Florida Tobacco Clearinghouse, 1999)

Through empowerment, youth are provided with opportunities to develop the competencies they need to become successful contributors to their communities Pittman & Wright, 1991) Youth are empowered when they feel they have choices in life, when they are aware of the implications of their choices when they make informed decisions freely, when they engage in action based on their informed decision, and when they become accountable for the consequences of their actions Morris, 1998) Youth who are focused on achievement work toward goals and avoid behaviors that would prevent attaining their goals (Hirsch, T, 1969)

Youth have identified the following factors that influence their feelings of empowerment non authoritarian adult leadership, being able to experience and exercise power receiving education and training, participating in critical analysis of issues experiencing an environment of safety closeness and appreciation being able to honestly express opinions and emotions, accepting diversity, developing a voice, and being able to take action D Benedetto, 1992) The following key elements are key to effective youth development programs a comprehensive strategy with a clear mission and goals committed caring professional leadership youth centered activities in youth access be facilities culturally competent and diverse programs youth ownership and involvement and a positive focus including all youth (National Youth Development Information Center, 2000)

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Resiliency

Resilience has been identified as a characteristic of youth who, when exposed to multiple risk factors, show successful responses to challenges (Rutter, 985; Hawkins et al, 992; Masten, Best & Garmezy, 1990; Werner, 1995, 1989). Research has shown that youth survive adversity when they are supported by caring and nurturing adults who help them develop a sense of purpose. Mentors and teachers can model caring relationships and maintain high expectations and provide opportunities to participate and contribute. These factors buffer risk and enable positive development by meeting young people's basic needs for safety, love, a sense of belonging, respect, power, accomplishment, and learning (Benard, 1991).

At least 50 percent of vulnerable youth grow up to be successful and confident, competent and caring in their personal attitudes and behaviors (Rutter 1987. Werner and Smith, 1992). In a longitudinal developmental study of resilience, most successful youth had someone in their families, schools or communities that modeled caring relationships, set high expectations, provided opportunities to participate, and received critical developmental support that shifted their life path from risk to resilience (Benard B. and Constantine, N.)

Asset Building

Assets are positive experiences, relationships, opportunities and personal qualities that young people need to grow up healthy, caring, and responsible (Search Institute, 1990. The Search Institute developed a framework of developmental assets – identifying internal and external resources that relieve adversity and help create successful decisions on making behavior.

The model identifies four categories of external assets

- Support Youth need support, care, and love from their families and others, and they need organizations and institutions that provide positive, supportive environments.
- Empowerment Young people need to feel valued and contribute to their communities. For this to occur, they must be safe and feel secure
- Boundaries and expectations Young people need to know what is expected of them and whether activities and behaviors are acceptable or unacceptable
- Constructive use of time Young people need constructive enriching opportunities for growth through creative activities, youth programs, congregational involvement, and quality time at home

The model also identifies four categories of internal assets

- Commitment to learning Young people need to develop a lifelong commitment to learning
- Positive values Youth need to develop strong values that guide their choices
- Social competencies Young people need skills and competencies that equip them to make positive choices, to build relationships, and to succeed in life

Positive identity Young people need a strong sense of their own power, purpose, worth and promise (Search Institute)

Youth with higher levels of assets are involved in fewer risk taking behaviors and positive development (Search Institute 1996) For example, in a study of 6,000 ethnically diverse youth in grades six through twelve assets contributed between 10 to 43 percent to the presence of thriving indicators for youth development over and above other demographic variables. The research also found that some assets contributed up to 54 percent of the variance. Scales, Benson, Leffert & Blyth, 2000)

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Other studies show that adolescents who report higher levels of these family and environmental supportive factors are less likely to engage in the use of alcohol and drugs or risky and violent behaviors (Benson, 1997; Bales, 2000; Scales, et al, 2000). They are also more likely to achieve academically, have healthy lifestyles, and participate in community service (Benson, 1997; Scales & Leffert, 1999; Lerner, 1993).

The asset approach encourages youth to share their talents with their communities as suggested by Kretzman and Sknmitz (1995). Cooperative Extension agents in other states have also utilized the approach e.g. Perkins & Butterfield 1999. This approach is also in line with the role of organizations such as 4-H that conduct educations, outreach programs that can be instrumental in positive outcomes for youth (Snider & Miller 1993).

Self-esteem

Self esteem refers to assessments that individuals make about themselves and the degree to which one is satisfied or dissatisfied (Beane J.A. and Lipka R.P., 1984). Self esteem is identified in some studies as an important protective factor. Self esteem is a particular way of experiencing the self that involves emotional, evaluative, and cognitive components (National Association for Self Esteem, 2000). A study of teens in grades 7-12 found that having high self esteem protected teens from emotional distress and from substance abuse, cigarettes, alcoho, and marijuana particularly for older teens (Resnick et al, 1997). Youth who value themselves appear more likely to resist peer pressure to engage in harmful behaviors (Scales & Leffert, 1999)

Youth Drugs and Alcohol

Research into risk and protective factors indicates that strengthening families improving parenting skills and helping families to establish strong, consistent norms about alcohol and other drug use can help prevent substance abuse including underage drinking, as well as violence and other related problems. Drug prevention programs that concentrate on self esteem, personal efficacy, decision making and communication skills rather than addressing the effects of the substances alone not only potentially reduce an individual's likelihood to use and abuse substances but also their likelihood to be involved in other risky behaviors such as unprotected sexual encounters (Joseph Donnelly)

Parent-Child Communication

Eearly and clear communications between parents and young people about sex is an important step in helping adolescents adopt and maintain protective sexual behaviors Centers for Disease Contro 2000) There is considerable evidence that parent involvement leads to improved student achievement, better school attendance, and reduced dropout rates and that these improvements occur regardless of the economic, racial or cultural background of the family (Kasman & Inger, 1991) Youth ages 10 to 15 reported that their parents were good credible sources of information on difficult issues such as AIDS violence, sex and alcohol (Kaiser Family Foundation and Children Now, 1998

In addition, a number of studies have been conducted in the Latino community about parental involvement According to a survey from the Henry J Kaiser Family Foundation there out of four Latino adults say they need help in learning how to discuss AIDS with young people A study conducted in 1998 found that Latino teens who talked with their mothers about condoms before they first sexual experience were three times more likely to use condoms than those who didn't talk to their mothers (Centers for Disease Control 2000) Based upon research in preventing sexually transmitted diseases, it is recommended that both adolescents and parents be involved in HIV AIDS education program design and that programs be behaviorally based rather than simply offer information (Haffner, 1989 Programs involving

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families prevent children's drug use and reinforce and increase the benefits of family life overall (Jones, 1997).

Mentoring

Mentoring is defined as a supportive relationship between youths and adults, or an individual who offers support, guidance and concrete assistance as the younger partner goes through a difficult period, enters a new area of experience, takes on important tasks, or addresses challenges (Falxman, Ascher and Harrington, 1998). Data clearly show that many youths have a desperate need for positive role models, in part motivated by changes in the American family. The number of single-parent homes has radically increased, as have two-parent working families. More preventive care is needed, as are support networks to fill the void left by busy or absent parents. (Cave and Quint, Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 1990).

Mentored youth are 46% less likely to initiate drug use, skipped half as many days of school, felt more competent about doing schoolwork, and showed modest gains in their grade point averages compared to untreated controls (Grossman, J.B. and Tierney, J.P. 1998). Research shows that providing youth with consistent adult support through a well-supervised, frequently meeting, long-term mentoring relationship improves grades and family relationships and helps prevent initiation of drug and alcohol use (Tierney and Grossman, 1995). Mentoring that is focused on providing friendship for youth can lead to the development of strong relationships; and strong relationships can foster significant positive changes in youth (Morrow and Styles, 1995; Tierney and Grossman, 1995).

Community Service Learning

Service learning can be defined as a method under which the students learn and develop through active participation in organized service experiences that meet community needs. Community service projects are best when integrated to the academic curriculum and provide structured time for students to communicate about what they experienced during the service activity. Projects should provide young people opportunities to use acquired skills and knowledge and build on what is learned in school (National and Community Service Act of 1990). Service learning and school-to-work are designed to connect students with their communities. Both promote a learning approach through which students apply academic and vocational skills and knowledge to address real life situations while developing attitudes, values and behaviors that will help them to become informed citizens and productive workers (Briscoe, et al., 1996). Students learn best when they are actively engaged in the learning process (Brown, 1998).

Self-confidence, competence, and empathy for others are some of the personal benefits students realize through service learning. By engaging in problem-solving and by working cooperatively and collaboratively with others, students are able to build skills needed for employment in today's workplace (Brown Bettina L., 1998). Service learning engages students in the solution of the authentic problems of the community, engaging them in critical analysis and reflection as a means of developing in them a greater understanding of issues within their situational context (Eyler, et al., 1997).

Cultural Competency

Cultural competency is a process that allows people to develop and expand their knowledge, sensitivity, and respect for cultural diversity. Cultural competency can be defined as behaviors attitudes, and policies that will ensure that a system, agency, program, or individual can function effectively and appropriately in diverse cultural interaction and settings (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000). An understanding of cultural values is an important part of cultural competence. It ensures an understanding, appreciation, and respect of cultural differences and similarities within, among, and between groups.

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Youth Invulnerability

The concept of invulnerability is that adolescents take risks because they ignore or greatly underestimate the actual risks associated with risky behaviors. Adolescents characteristically believe that they are impervious to disease, accidents, and death (Hochhauser, 1988). Feelings of invulnerability and hopelessness among adolescents encourage risk-taking. Low self-esteem and inadequate self-efficacy are also associated with risky behaviors. Negative attitudes about sexuality in young adults have been found to interfere with sexual communication and the performance of prevention acts.

Understanding adolescents' risk perception is an important first step in prevention of risky behaviors among youth, because people act on their perceptions. To understand sexual risk-taking among adolescents, one must first understand adolescent risk-perception (Chapin, 2001).

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